

## 11

## *The HighScope Approach to Early Learning*

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### *Learning Objectives*

After studying this chapter the reader should be able to:

- Describe the historical origins, the longitudinal research, and the theoretical underpinnings of the HighScope approach.
- Identify the teaching strategies adopted by HighScope educators.
- Appreciate the curriculum content.
- Understand the HighScope approach to the assessment of children's learning.
- Consider some criticisms of the HighScope research and approach to early learning.

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the HighScope curriculum. It is presented in order of the learning objectives listed above.

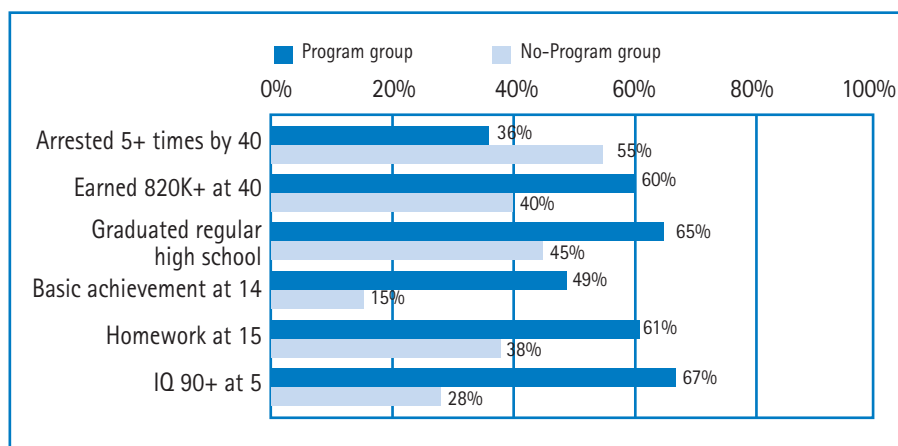
### **SETTING THE CONTEXT: HISTORY, RESEARCH AND THEORY**

The name 'HighScope' refers to the high purposes and far-reaching mission of a model of education originating in the USA. Its goal is to improve the life chances of children and young people by promoting high-quality educational programmes. The HighScope approach was designed by David Weikart and colleagues, beginning in 1962, '... in response to the persistent failures of high school students from Ypsilanti's poorest neighbourhoods' (Hohmann and Weikart 1995:3).

Weikart was a director of special services in Ypsilanti Public Schools, Michigan. He believed that the low scores of some students on academic and intelligence tests were due to a lack of educational opportunities and inadequate school preparation rather than a lack of innate intelligence. Furthermore, he believed that poor performance at secondary schools correlated with attendance at elementary schools in poor neighbourhoods. An intervention to prevent school failure for 3- to 4-year-old children was established with a classroom secured in the Perry Elementary School

from 1962 to 1968. It became known as the HighScope Perry Preschool Project. A longitudinal study was designed to compare the progress of children attending the Project with those who did not receive the pre-school experience. A hundred and twenty-three children were randomly assigned to programme (58 children) or no-programme (65 children) control groups. This strategy of random assignment means that children's experiences at the experimental Perry Preschool Project remain the best evidence for the subsequent differences that were observed in social and intellectual performance between the control and the programme group. In addition to the high-quality programme delivered by trained teachers, children's families received regular home visits. Figure 11.1 details the main study findings for the programme participants at age 40.

**Figure 11.1 Major findings of the Perry PreSchool Study**



Source: Schweinhart *et al.* (2007)

In a monograph on the research, which measures the outcomes for the children from age 3 to age 41, Schweinhart and his colleagues concluded that:

High-quality preschool programs for young children living in poverty contribute to their intellectual and social development in childhood and their school success, economic performance, and reduced commission of crime in adulthood. This study confirms that these findings extend not only to young adults, but also to adults in midlife. It confirms that the long-term effects are lifetime effects. (Schweinhart *et al.* 2005:5)

The HighScope Educational Research Foundation was founded in 1970 by Weikart to continue the research and programme activities he had originally initiated. The foundation engages in research, curriculum development, publishing, training and

communication. Centres for the dissemination of HighScope materials and ideas are located in twenty countries outside the USA, including Ireland.

The HighScope approach to learning is grounded in research, theory and practice and is continually updated (Epstein 2007). In designing the curriculum, Weikart and his colleagues initially drew extensively from Piaget's research on child development and John Dewey's philosophy of progressive education. Piaget's theory on cognitive development supported the originating team's philosophy that theory and practice must support each child's capacity to develop through active learning (Hohmann and Weikart 1995). Dewey's influence is seen in the prominence in the HighScope approach of playful active engagement in real-life experiences using real materials. Currently HighScope is underpinned by more recent research on cognitive development and on brain activity. The former emphasises learning pathways related to specific content, such as early number and vocabulary, and the latter on the importance of children's interactions with people, things, experiences and, later, ideas (Epstein 2007). Since learning happens in the socio-cultural milieu in which it occurs, the work of Vygotsky and his followers now influence the teaching practices of HighScope educators (Epstein 2007).

## TEACHING STRATEGIES

The HighScope approach for babies and toddlers (children from approximately 6 weeks to approximately 3 years of age) and for pre-schoolers (children from approximately 2½ years to the beginning of formal schooling at approximately 6 years of age) share core components.

The cornerstone of the HighScope approach to early childhood education is the belief that *active participatory learning* through play is fundamental to the full development of human potential. It occurs most successfully in environments that are appropriate to the context of children's development. Children in active learning environments experience enjoyment, control, interest, probability of success, feelings of competence and self-confidence. To evaluate whether activities are truly appropriate to the context of development and provide active learning experiences, the following ingredients of active learning were developed by HighScope researchers and educators (Epstein 2007). Abundant, age-appropriate *materials* that appeal to children's senses and can be used in a variety of ways are provided: HighScope argues that learning grows out of the child's direct actions on and thinking about the materials. Children have opportunities to explore, *manipulate*, combine and transform the materials chosen. Since learning results from the child's attempts to pursue personal interests and goals, the opportunity for children to *choose* activities and materials is considered to be essential. Through their *language and thought*, children are encouraged to think about and communicate, in words and actions, what they are doing. Children integrate new experiences into an existing knowledge base, and seek the co-operation of others in their activities. Through *adult* scaffolding, educators recognise and encourage the child's reasoning, problem solving, and creativity. In

HighScope, educators 'first validate what children already know, and then challenge them to extend their thinking to the next level' (Epstein 2007:18).

The *learning environment* in a HighScope setting, indoors and outdoors, is carefully planned to provide children with the optimum opportunities to work independently, to make choices and decisions and to solve problems. Children are actively encouraged to use the materials in creative ways. For example, it is just as valid to stack pieces of a jigsaw as it is to make the jigsaw. The indoor and outdoor space is organised into specific *areas* of interest to support children's involvement with activities such as building, pretending and role play, 'reading' and 'writing', playing with sand and water, drawing and painting, counting, sorting, climbing, singing and dancing. The areas are stocked with a wide variety of easily accessible, open-ended natural, found, real-life and commercial materials, which reflect children's home cultures and interests and can be used in creative and purposeful ways, providing ample opportunities for problems to be solved. These materials are *labelled* and *stored* so that children can find, use and return materials they need. Children are encouraged to combine materials from different areas.

HighScope advocates that the *daily routine* provides a common framework of support for children of diverse abilities as they pursue their interests and engage in various learning experiences. The daily routine consists of specific time segments allotted to certain activities and is designed to support children's initiatives and to be flexible. The routine enables children to anticipate what happens next and gives them control over what they do in each part of the day. For babies and toddlers the daily schedule is centred on care-giving routines and is flexible but predictable. The routine includes sensitive arrivals and departures, feeding and mealtimes, bodily care routines, nap times, choice times, outside time, and group times.

For preschoolers it includes the *plan—do—review* process unique to HighScope, which enables children to express their intentions, carry them out and reflect on what they've done. *Small-group time* provides educator-initiated learning experiences based on observations of children's interests, key developmental indicators and local events. In *large-group time*, educators and children initiate music and movement activities, storytelling and so on. Other aspects of the routine include greeting time, tidy-up time, outside time, break and transition times.

Research evidence suggests that the engagement of parents and families in their child's education improves children's academic performance and their motivation. *Parental participation* leads to higher adult expectations and increased parental confidence and aspirations (Schweinhart *et al.* 2005). HighScope programmes offer a variety of meaningful opportunities for fathers, mothers and educators to work together sharing information on *how* to extend children's learning and development. These opportunities can include: daily conversations; family group meetings; conducting home visits; parents' or educators' observations, using a diary or film as a focus for discussion (given due ethical considerations for the confidential nature of the material), or attending key concept sessions (perhaps on an aspect of child development). Epstein (2007) suggests that occasions which develop relationships with children's families can build bridges between the setting and home, enhances

parents' and educators' understanding of children and encourages learning opportunities in the home (for example, shopping as a literacy experience identifying listed items, or unpacking the shopping into presses as a mathematical exercise in spatial awareness). Finally, parental participation enriches the programme. Importantly, parents' sharing of information supports educators' planning for children's learning which builds on children's interests in the home.

To support and extend babies' and toddlers' play, recommended HighScope *adult—child interaction* strategies include offering children comfort and contact, participating in play, and conversing with children. Educators share control with pre-school children, focus on their strengths, form authentic relationships with them and support their play. Throughout the day educators use a problem-solving approach, for example asking, 'How will you stick that page up?', 'How can you get this juice carton open?' In addition, educators use encouragement and a problem-solving approach to social conflict, as opposed to praise, punishment or reward, for the management of children's behaviour.

## CURRICULUM CONTENT

*Key developmental indicators* (KDIs), previously known as key experiences, are developed by HighScope to organise the content of children's learning. They are a series of statements describing the overall development of children. In other words, they describe what children do as they play and learn in early childhood settings. They guide educators as they observe, support and plan experiences for children and as they evaluate their early childhood practices. Key developmental indicator statements are available for babies and toddlers, pre-schoolers and elementary (school-age) children.

HighScope identifies forty-two baby and toddler KDIs organised within six content areas, and fifty-eight pre-school KDIs within eight content areas. For example, babies and toddlers develop their *approaches to learning*, learning 'what is me and what is not me' through to the concept of 'I can do it myself'. They achieve healthy *social and emotional development* through forming close attachments, building relationships and interacting with adults and peers. Babies and toddlers experience *physical development and health* through developing muscle control and listening to steady beat. They learn *communication, language and literacy* skills from gestures, 'cooing' to 'talking', listening and responding and exploring print. Babies and toddlers enhance their *cognitive development* by exploring objects, through mouths, hands and feet. They learn about early number concepts; a toddler experiences 'more' by putting more than one object into a box. They begin to learn about time; for babies time is 'now'; toddlers begin to anticipate — 'putting on coats means going for a walk'.

Through the *creative arts*, children imitate and pretend. By experiencing many times what a banana tastes, feels and looks like, babies and toddlers get a mental picture of a banana and can identify it in photos; later they can draw its image. Each statement highlights an active learning experience that is essential for the

fundamental abilities that emerge during childhood. The content areas in which the pre-school KDIs are organised are:

- approaches to learning
- language, literacy and communication
- social and emotional development
- physical development and health
- mathematics
- creative arts
- science and technology
- social studies.

Both sets of KDIs are arranged to correspond to the National Goals for Education in the USA. They equally relate to Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework in Ireland.

## ASSESSMENT

In the HighScope approach careful daily observation of children's experiences is seen as essential to planning, teaching and learning. The KDIs are used as the basis for the HighScope record-keeping process. Educators record brief, precise anecdotes or capsule summaries of children in action as they play, build, pretend, explore and talk. These narratives are then arranged within the main KDIs and cross-referenced if appropriate (acknowledging the complexity and integrated nature of children's learning and development). Selected anecdotal notes can then be transcribed into the *child observation record* (COR). The COR is a comprehensive and validated assessment tool. It affords a systematic assessment of young children's abilities and knowledge, incorporating all areas of development. In addition to the anecdotal notes, portfolios and other evidence of children's work can be included. The COR is administered as a baseline assessment when children have settled into the setting and is ideally followed by two further assessments throughout the year. The KDIs and hence the COR can be recorded electronically.

## CRITICISM OF THE HIGHSCOPE RESEARCH AND APPROACH

In relation to the HighScope Perry Preschool Study, questions have been raised about, for example, the study's internal and external validity, the small sample size and thus its significance, and the study's generalisability and replicability. These questions have been robustly defended (Schweinhart 2007). Other criticisms centre on the tension between maintaining any educational approach and modifying it, if it is written down. In other words, if changes are made to the programme, at what point does it stop being HighScope (Pound 2005)? Perry participants may have

outperformed their control group counterparts, but they could be considered to have performed poorly in comparison with mainstream children (Olsen 2003). Furthermore, the approach has been criticised as being underpinned by a compensatory approach to education. Such an approach aims to compensate for educational inequality or poverty as opposed to being aimed at *all* children (Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson 2008). Nonetheless, the HighScope approach contains components of high-quality early childhood education which is emulated in other robust studies (for example Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2002).

### Key Learning Points

- HighScope is continually being updated to reflect the latest child development research, the experience of practising educators, the development of new theories and the curriculum content standards of state and professional associations.
- Central to HighScope are: the provision of opportunities for active participatory learning; attention to the learning environment; the establishment and adoption of a consistent but flexible daily routine; working with families sharing educational experiences; modelling respectful ways of interacting with others.
- Ongoing observation and assessment of children's learning as they engage in their everyday experiences is essential to the approach. Staff teams share their observations and assessments to plan for further learning experiences and interactions.
- Training in the HighScope approach and continuing professional development through communities of practice is necessary in implementing the HighScope (or any) approach.

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Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S., Gilden, R. and Bell, D. (2002) *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years*, Research Report No. 356. London: Department for Education and Skills.

### Further Reading

French, G. and Murphy, P. (2005) *Once in a Lifetime: Early Childhood Education and Care for Children from Birth to Three*. Dublin: Barnardos.

Schweinhart, L.J. (2007) *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40: Summary, Conclusions, and Frequently Asked Questions* <[www.highscope.org](http://www.highscope.org)>.

### Useful Website

HighScope: [www.highscope.org](http://www.highscope.org)